



Day of Pentecost

12th June 2011

Acts 2: 1-21, Psalm 104:24-34, 35b, 1 Corinthians 12:3b-13, John 20:19-23

In the name of God, Father Son and Holy Spirit, Amen

Our readings today begin with “*When the day of Pentecost had come*”, and then right in the middle of that first reading we have the question in verse 12:

"What does this mean?"

Before we more fully explore all three readings, let's give some thought to some of the classical understandings of Pentecost. Pentecost is seen as a miraculous theophany – an appearance of God as flames of fire on the disciple's heads signifying that they had been gifted and filled with the Holy Spirit. This event of ‘setting apart’ has been enshrined by the Church and in the bishop's mitre, which is a symbolic representation of the Pentecost flame. So let me rephrase this meaning and see if it rings true: ‘Pentecost is the event in history when bishops' hats were designed by God.’ Of course it doesn't ring true, we know Pentecost is more, and means more, but it is a valuable rephrasing to illustrate the primitive understanding on which some of our inherited ‘wisdom’ has been founded, for holding on to Pentecost as an historical event does little justice to what the whole drama reveals.

If Pentecost was *the day*, the day some were filled with the Holy Spirit, then what about those who lived before the event? What about those excluded from the event? What do we make of the account of Baptism whereby we hear the Spirit descended like a dove? Or, the blessings visited upon Abraham? Or the nativity event that speaks of the Word becoming flesh? Did Moses part the sea without any Divine Spirit in his being? Did Sarah bear children whilst spiritually barren? Did Christ walk from the tomb, alone in his Divine emptiness?

When we ask of Pentecost *"What does this mean?"* we should not be looking for an understanding of the past, nor of an event in the life of ‘*Peter, standing with the eleven*’. Rather, we should seek an understanding of the event in the ‘now’ and in the always of eternity, an event in the shaping of our lives and one providing an orientation toward wholeness and fullness.

So let's put aside our previous understandings of Pentecost and look again at the readings. When I first started looking at the readings for this week I wondered who they were written by. The closest I could come to in my own heart was Shakespeare, and it's quite helpful sometimes to read the readings without the overlay of all those holy people, without the overlay of ‘God's hand wrote this’; throw all that away and think of this as written by someone more real, someone who's got an insight and is seeking to make that insight available to us. Acts gives us a dramatic narrative of revelation; it stages it in such a way that it draws us into reflection, and within that bold drama lie the subtleties of revelation.

One of the obvious repetitions in the story is that they *were ALL together in one place*, and *ALL were filled with the Holy Spirit*. This drama has a starting point that is inclusive and embracing of ALL. Those who want to contemplate further, look for where you might experience or even desire to be *together in one place*. What does that mean? No such thing as alone, *together in one place*.

Following the rush of wind and the appearance of flames with the filling of the Holy Spirit, we hear in verse 4 that they *began to speak in other languages*, they began to speak in tongues. Once again the Church has many understandings and misunderstandings in regard to ‘speaking in tongues’. It is a subject that has been debated, questioned, experienced, dismissed and lauded, as a sign if not the sign of being filled with the Holy Spirit. Why so much emphasis on verse 4, on *speak in other languages*? If we look at verses 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10 and 11 and we will see what is really being emphasised here. That is, they spoke such that they could be heard by those *from every nation under heaven* [v5]. They spoke from a place within themselves where they were *together in one place*. They spoke from a place within that has an orientation toward the common, toward the all. They made manifest the Word in the world: they encountered and engaged in the activity of God: the Christmas narrative itself comes to life. They made manifest the Word in and to the world. The inclusive repetitions from the start of the narrative are here brought out again and are made real for *every nation under heaven*.

The central question of v12 *"What does this mean?"* exposes another reality, and that is the reality of division; it's another reality belonging to the *'now' and the always of eternity*. There is in verse 12 those who are ‘amazed’, and in verse 13 the ‘others who sneered’. Significantly, it is those who are amazed that asked the question *"What does this mean?"* Those who sneered wrote off any opportunity for Divine revelation, writing off the whole process with their own choice of understanding.

From verse 14 on, *Peter, standing with the eleven* provides an interpretation of Pentecost in the language and landscape of eternity, the all-embracing time between the moment of prophesy and the last days. He brings the drama back to the orientation of inclusivity:

'I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. 18 Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy. All flesh, sons, daughters, young, old, slaves, both men and women. And he brings time back into the present, for in the last days he's talking about, they shall prophesy. Peter is speaking in the place of eternity, not then, but now, in the always-now: it is an event of encounter in the process of life in the present.

The reading from Corinthians is delightfully complementary to the subtleties of revelation that we found in the drama of Acts. The reality of inclusiveness and the reality of division are brought into integrity through the orientation of the Spirit. *'Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; 5 and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; 6 and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone.'* The varieties of division are brought together into the wholeness of the Divine. We have gifts, which both complement our differences and at the same time bring us *together in one place*. As individuals and in community there are: *varieties of gifts, varieties of services; varieties of activities*, and they have their integrity, they become visible, as visible as a flame on our heads when we fully appreciate that *'To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.'* So important - we are different, yet we have

an orientation toward each other and to all, and it is in this orientation we make manifest the Holy Spirit, we ignite the flame.

The last reading, from the gospel, speaks even more loudly of us today, for in it we are identified in our reality. *'When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews.....'* Let me rephrase that one: each evening and every day of the week, behind the locked doors of Australian homes the people meet with their TV shows, and the doors are locked for fear of being overrun by refugees. We're in the same story, we're in the same narrative; we're in the same place in term of process, in terms of realising the Divine. The gospel gives us a very simple reminder of the power we have received, and that we might well employ when we find our integrity of Spirit: *'he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. 23 If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."'* Previously this power, no less than the keys to the kingdom, was given to Peter. Here we see it is breathed into us all.

So we have the choice, for this is the Day of Pentecost. We can go off and make for ourselves pointy hats, or we can seek to find ourselves *together in one place*, making manifest the Word in the world through the power of forgiveness.

The Lord be with you
Peter Humphris